

# THE Z FACTOR

NO EMBARRASSING AUDITIONS NECESSARY – JUST THREE EASY ROUTES TO STUNNING GUITAR TONE. **TIM SLATER** PULLS UP HIS SIMON COWELL TROUSERS

**GBINFO**

**DR Z**  
 BUILT IN: USA  
 TYPE: All-valve amp heads

**MAZ 18 JR NR**  
 PRICE: £949  
 POWER: 18 watts  
 VALVES: 2 x EL84, 3 x 12AX7, 1 x 6Z34  
 FEATURES: Volume, treble, bass, middle, cut & master volume controls, effects send & return, 4- & 8-ohm speaker outputs  
 DIMENSIONS: 248(h) x 483(w) x 241(d) mm  
 WEIGHT: 10kg (22lbs)

**CARMEN GHIA**  
 PRICE: £799  
 POWER: 18 watts  
 VALVES: 2 x EL84, 1 x 5751, 1 x 12AX7, 1 x 5Y3  
 FEATURES: Volume & tone controls, 4- & 8-ohm speaker outputs  
 DIMENSIONS: 229(h) x 445(w) x 241(d) mm  
 WEIGHT: 8.16kg (18lbs)

**ROUTE 66**  
 PRICE: £1,250  
 POWER: 32 watts  
 VALVES: 2 x KT66, 1 x EF86, 1 x 12AX7  
 FEATURES: Volume, treble & bass controls, 4-, 8- & 16-ohm speaker outputs  
 DIMENSIONS: 251(h) x 445(w) x 241(d) mm  
 WEIGHT: 10kg (22lbs)

**CONTACT:**  
 Peach Guitars  
 PHONE: 01376 553675  
 WEB: www.peachideas.com

So-called 'boutique' amps offer a refined approach to accessing pure and uncluttered guitar tone, more often than not by the simplest and most direct route and usually accompanied by a price tag that reflects the many man hours, high level of technical skill and first-class components used in their construction. But what are the benefits of buying an expensive, hand-built guitar amp when there are any number of excellent mass-produced varieties available in the shops for a fraction of the cost?

It's kind of like the difference between a hand-built sports car like a Morgan and a mass-produced Mazda MX-5 – the Mazda might be easier to get your hands on, and bristling with all the whistles and bells that you could ever need, but at the end of

the day it is still the same homogenous vehicle owned by tens of thousands of other drivers. But the bespoke car makes the whole driving experience much more exciting. You tingle with the sheer visceral thrill of being behind the wheel, whereas the Mazda is predictable, safe and maybe a bit dull. And while an MX-5 in your driveway is not to be sniffed at, which of the two do you think is going to turn the most heads?

If your motivation for wanting to own a boutique guitar rig is to kick out the kind of tones that make your fellow guitarists turn green with envy every time you turn on, plug in and rock out, Dr Z is always going to be well worth a look. These three valve amp heads from the American manufacturer represent three particularly nice examples of the company's approach, which places the emphasis on simple yet elegantly designed products with high-quality components and extremely impressive build quality.



**CAB FOR DR Z!**

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MATCHING CABINETS OFFERED FOR THESE AMPS

While reviewing these amps, we also had the chance to check out two of the speaker cabinets that Dr Z manufactures.

These cabs might look very similar, and both are priced at a relatively modest £399, but while one is equipped with a single 12-inch speaker, the other has two 10-inch speakers. The cabinets are built from high-quality Baltic birch ply and, like the amps, they're available

in a choice of black, red or blonde Tolex. The 1x12 is fitted with a single Celestion Vintage 30 speaker as standard, with Dr Z providing its own custom 10-inch drivers for the 2x10 version. A removable section at the rear of both cabinets allows the user to choose between a closed or open-back cab configuration. The difference in sound between the two cabinets is hard to describe, but in a nutshell,

the 2x10 probably has a slightly faster attack than the 1x12, but it doesn't give anything away to the larger single speaker in terms of bottom-end thump.

Either of these cabs will provide an excellent sonic platform for any one of these heads, and look pretty damn sharp while they're at it. And what's the point of having a sexy boutique head without a gorgeous matching cab to go with it?



A mesh grille protects the Route 66's valves

The simple control layout comprises a conventional set of rotary controls with independent volume and master volume, a standard EQ section featuring bass, middle and treble knobs, and an additional 'cut' tone control. The vintage vibe is offset by a pair of quarter-inch send and return jack sockets mounted at the rear of the amp chassis for the amp's built-in effects loop. A further two jack sockets offer a choice of either 8- or 4-ohm speaker output, depending on the impedance and how many external speakers are hooked up.

Dr Z amps are available in a choice of livery, but the bright red Tolex and cream knobs on this review sample work well together and look very eye-catching, while the overall standard of build and finishing is superb. The mains cable is hard-wired to the amp's chassis (rather than being detachable), which looks a bit strange in this age of CE-approved conformity, but at least you get a decent length of cable to work with.

**SOUNDS – MAZ 18 JR NR**

This mini rig feels like it's aimed squarely at the recording studio or smaller venues, but don't be deceived by the relatively low power rating – this little sucker dishes out more racket than a coach-load of Millwall fans at chucking-out time!

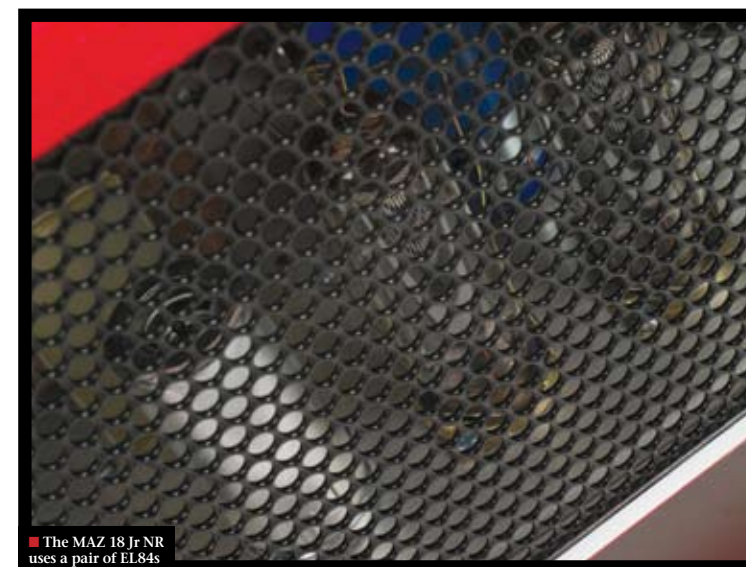
On the surface, all three amps seem very simple, which is indeed what they are, but don't let the no-frills approach fool you. The tones on tap are neither primitive nor raw – there are multiple layers of great tone to discover here, brimming with subtlety and sophistication.

**FEATURES – MAZ 18 JR NR**

The MAZ 18 Jr is the offspring of an earlier Dr Z design, the MAZ-38, which has now been replaced by the MAZ 38 Sr. The MAZ 18 Jr is designed to offer similar performance in a lower-powered, more compact package. This 18-watter is powered by a pair of EL84 output valves, three 12AX7s in the preamp stage and, most interestingly, a GZ34 rectifier valve throbbing away in there as well. The model we're reviewing is the 'NR' or 'non-reverb' version, lacking the valve-driven spring reverb of the regular MAZ 18 Jr, which costs around £200 more.



The 'NR' stands for 'non-reverb'



The MAZ 18 Jr NR uses a pair of EL84s

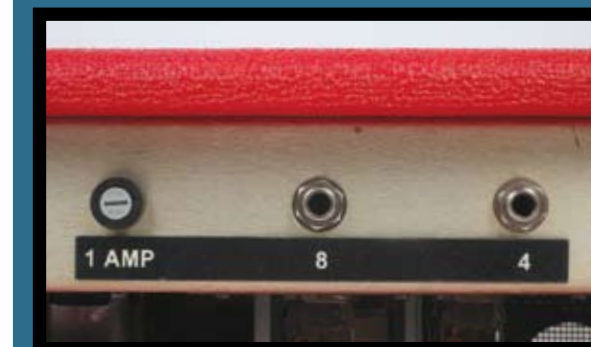
However, it isn't just the sheer output that impresses – the big surprise is the way this amp manages to sound uncannily like a small Fender tube amp, despite using EL84s (as found in the Vox AC30) rather than the 6V6 or 6L6 output tubes that you'd usually expect to find in a Fender.

The Fender-like quality comes from the Maz-18's rich, fulsome voice, which positively drips with musical-sounding second- and third-order harmonics. You don't even need to crank the volume up particularly high to make yourself heard, either. Obviously, how loud you need to play will depend on your overall musical environment, but as a rule of thumb, you shouldn't find yourself needing to mic up the MAZ 18 unless you're playing in a large hall or a theatre. In a small club or the back room of your local boozier, the MAZ 18 should have absolutely no problems being heard on its own.

To test the amp we used a trusty US-made Fender Telecaster fitted with a medium-output Stratocaster neck pickup and a meatier-sounding Bare Knuckle Boss bridge pickup, a combination that offers a nice palette of chunky rhythm and biting lead tones. Thanks to the MAZ 18, the Strat neck pickup has never sounded so sweet. The bass is tight and punchy and the mids sound smooth without being overly slick. The single-coil's naturally gnarled edges take on the character and warmth of an old oak table – well worn but never ugly. The same could be said of the bridge pickup. Tele bridge pickups can be notoriously unforgiving, but the MAZ highlights the Telecaster's rugged

**BACK TO BASICS**

FOR FANS OF THE NO-FRILLS APPROACH



While all three Dr Z heads are impeccably constructed and neatly finished, they have a definite functional feel.

As handsome as they are, you get the feeling that function (that is, producing great tone) definitely comes before form on the list of priorities. Nothing reflects this better than the rear panels of the Carmen Ghia and Route 66. While the MAZ

18 Jr NR has a fully painted and printed back panel, the other two amps are verging on the austere.

Who needs printed text to describe the functions of the jack sockets when a strip of tape stuck on the unfinished metal of the chassis will do? You get a real sense of the amp having been lovingly created in some electronics boffin's lair.

**"THE HIGHS SPARKLE AND THE LOW MIDS PUNCH YOU STRAIGHT IN THE GUTS"**

stripped-for-action raunch, allowing the player to dial in a wide spectrum of top Tele tones from Keef to Quo. The highs sparkle and the low mids punch you straight in the guts!

The cut control is great for dialling in those elusive clean/dirty, dirty/clean sounds so beloved of blues players like Stevie Ray, or Hendrix in his milder moments. Set the cut control up about half-way, sit back and soak it all in, and we guarantee that you won't wipe the big silly grin off your face for days. ■







Unusually, the MAZ 18's mains cable is hard-wired



The Route 66's control layout is nothing if not straightforward

**FEATURES – CARMEN GHIA**

The Carmen Ghia is another 18-watt head powered by a pair of EL84 power tubes, but this little amp is a far simpler affair. Like the MAZ 18, the Carmen Ghia's front panel features a lone power switch, but the main tone-shaping equipment is restricted to a pair of rotary controls for volume and tone, the argument presumably being that you don't need any more than this and your guitar's volume pot to alter the amp's timbre and dig out the tones of your dreams.

The amp's rear panel features a Euro-friendly IEC mains inlet (aka a female three-pin 'kettle-style' socket) and separate output jacks for 8- and 4-ohm extension speakers. A large baton running across the back protects those vulnerable valves from unwelcome intrusion by foreign objects, while gaps either side allow cooling air to reach them.

**GBOPINION**

**DR Z MAZ 18 JR NR**  
**GOLD STARS**  
 ★ Tone, tone and more luscious tone!  
 ★ Great build quality  
 ★ Cut control adds versatility  
**BLACK MARKS**  
 ● None  
**IDEAL FOR...**  
 Blues, jazz, country or trad rock – a great range of tones

**"THE CARMEN GHIA IS THE IDEAL WEAPON FOR A PROPER OLD-SCHOOL BLUES PLAYER"**

Of course, the whole thing is beautifully constructed and finished to a very high standard, but there are virtually no frills – everything is there to serve a purpose and do its job.

**SOUNDS – CARMEN GHIA**

The Carmen Ghia sounds like an altogether different beast to the MAZ 18. The Ghia seems to have more mid-range grunt than the MAZ, but is still almost as harmonically complex. This is the very same model as used by top American blues guitarist Buddy Whittington (the current lead guitarist with John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers) and you quickly appreciate why this Start player favours this amp.

With the tone pot turned anti-clockwise past the 12 o'clock point, the Ghia has a glassy shimmer that begins to take on a darker,

more hairy-sounding growl once the tone control is cranked clockwise. The darker tone doesn't muffle the guitar sound at all – it just seems to add a soupçon of extra mid-range muscle while coating everything in a warm, velvety halo.

Cranking up the volume until the output

valves begin to clip produces a mild but sweet and very useable distortion that cleans up beautifully when you turn the guitar's volume pot down. One mild criticism is that even when left idle, there is a pronounced mains hum – not enough to ruin your night (it's not noticeable when you're playing) but if you are prone to be sensitive to such things it could begin to get on your nerves.

Without wishing to paint the Carmen Ghia into a corner, we'd say that this is the ideal weapon for a proper old-school blues player who really knows how to use a guitar and amplifier together as a single unit, balancing the timbre, gain and volume to create the tones that they want instead of relying on multiple channels to do basically the same job.

The mere thought of combining this amp and a vintage Gibson Les Paul Junior with a single P-90 pickup, tuned to an open chord and played with a big glass slide... just thinking about it is enough to make you go all wobbly at the knees!

**FEATURES – ROUTE 66**

Described as a "tweed amp on steroids" by a certain member of the British tone cognoscenti, the Route 66 is the most powerful amp of the Dr Z trio reviewed here, delivering around 32 watts. It's powered by a pair of KT66 output tubes, which



**DETAILS**

SUPERB BOUTIQUE TONE AT A PRICE YOU JUST CAN'T ARGUE WITH



■ Unlike the other two amps, the MAZ 18 Jr NR features a master volume control



■ Volume and tone controls are all it takes to wring fine tone from the Carmen Ghia



■ The 1x12 cab has a Celestion Vintage 30, while the 2x10 gets Dr Z custom speakers



**GBCONCLUSION**

A TRIO OF TONE TITANS

■ Plug into any of these heads and immediately you're tapped into a vast reservoir of rich, musical tones. And compared to many of their hand-wired US counterparts, the prices are extremely competitive.

The MAZ 18 Jr NR is the most sophisticated of the three, but even this amp is relatively light on features by modern standards. Each of these heads offers a direct route to awesome tone, and they're perfect for players who like to control their sound the old-fashioned way – with their pick, their fingers and the guitar's volume control. The Carmen Ghia is perfect for blues players, while the Route 66, with its fat, dynamic tone and extra headroom, could prove more versatile than you might think with a few good stompboxes. The MAZ 18, with its uncanny ability to channel elements of both classic Fender and Marshall sounds, is a cracking amp for the studio or stage. With excellent sounds and build quality, these Dr Zs look like a worthwhile investment. **GB**

**GBOPINION**

**DR Z CARMEN GHIA**  
GOLD STARS

- ★ A no-nonsense monster of tone
- ★ Great build quality
- ★ Superb feel and sensitivity

**BLACK MARKS**

- More background hum than we'd like

**IDEAL FOR...**

Old-fashioned blues and rock players who like to just plug in and play

**GBOPINION**

**DR Z ROUTE 66**  
GOLD STARS

- ★ Sweet, blooming tone
- ★ Great build quality
- ★ Plenty of volume and headroom

**BLACK MARKS**

- None

**IDEAL FOR...**

Blues, jazz and, with an overdrive pedal, any shade of rock 'n' roll

immediately suggests a fairly generous amount of clean headroom before the amp begins to break up. However, a high-gain EF86 pentode tube in the preamp (alongside a 12AX7) also indicates that the Route 66 is designed to deliver a certain kind of highly refined overdrive with a very useable dynamic range – the EF86 was a key component in the legendary and highly-prized Vox AC15 amps produced during the late 1950s.

The rear panel features 16-, 8- and 4-ohm speaker outputs, and everything looks functional and almost home-made, in a simple, well-engineered sort of way. The front panel control knobs are the only slight let-down – compared with the sexy off-white plastic knobs on the other two heads, the rough steel dials used on the Route 66 don't have quite the same appeal.

**SOUNDS – ROUTE 66**

The great thing about KT66s is how they make the sound of the guitar 'bloom'. Turn up the volume and the guitar doesn't distort or overdrive in

the traditional sense. Rather, the sound becomes increasingly fatter and more dynamic. Winding both tone controls to the max increases the overall gain and volume, but due to the amp's ability to retain clean-ish headroom at fairly loud volumes, you'd be advised to cart along a good overdrive pedal to goose up the front end a bit – for solos, say.

We used a Pro-Co Rat pedal with the Route 66 and the amp coped equally well with the pedal set to full-on fuzz mayhem or wound back for a smoother, softer overdrive. The bass end remains tight and focussed and the top end really sings, with excellent note definition and articulation across every string.

**GBRATINGS**

**DR Z MAZ 18 JR NR, CARMEN GHIA & ROUTE 66**

|                  |       |
|------------------|-------|
| BUILD QUALITY    | ★★★★★ |
| FEATURES         | ★★★★★ |
| SOUNDS           | ★★★★★ |
| VALUE FOR MONEY  | ★★★★★ |
| <b>GBVERDICT</b> | ★★★★★ |